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The Inevitability of Alienation

The analysis of confused concepts has been one of the central functions of philosophy since Socrates. But how can one analyze "alienation"? If we concentrate on one person to prove that he does not know what he thinks he knows and that he contradicts himself, we leave the impression that one hapless victim was in a bad way while dozens of reputable writers know perfectly well what they are talking about. Thus Socrates' method fails us.

What is needed is a careful, critical survey of the ways in which many of the most influential writers have used the term. That, of course, is a difficult undertaking and requires considerable scholarship. But short of that, we shall always be reduced to confusion when we read about alienation. And if we simply do not care how other men have used the word and say, in effect, "This is how I shall use it," we are quite apt to be told that the term really means something else and that we ought to read this writer or that.

Richard Schacht has written a badly needed book. He tells us briefly how "alienation" was used before 1800; he shows how Hegel, the father of the contemporary discussion, spoke of alienation in two diametrically opposed senses, and how Marx's uses of the term, which are analyzed at length, are still different. Anyone interested in Hegel and Marx will find these chapters fascinating, and all who are concerned with alienation will find them immensely helpful and illuminating. Schacht goes on to give us a detailed critique of the many senses in which Erich Fromm has used the term, a briefer

discussion of Karen Horney, an extremely interesting survey of recent sociological literature on alienation, and finally some discussion of Heidegger, Tillich, and Sartre.

Henceforth, nobody should write about alienation without first reading Schacht's book. Others have had doubts whether the word had not been used so promiscuously that its usefulness had been seriously impaired. But what was needed was not a blanket resolve to abandon the term or to use it in some clearly specified way. What was needed was clarification.

Nor is this all Schacht offers us. He shows that there is no single general meaning of "alienation" of which different writers could be said to have discussed different aspects. But it does not follow that the conditions to which the term has been applied do not deserve serious study. On the contrary, it is high time to reconsider them. But anyone who wishes to do that—as I do, for example—will also be in Schacht's debt for having brought together in a single volume the major claims that have been made about these phenomena.

Schacht has given us a prolegomena to any future study of alienation. This introductory essay gives me an opportunity to suggest where we might go from here.

My central interest is not in the concept but in the conditions to which it has been applied. These are widely held to be specifically modern, but I hope to show that they were common to most, if not all, of the great philosophers of the past. I shall deal similarly with literature and art—not only with a few major poets of the past but also with Oedipus and Hamlet and with the public's relation to literature, art, and music. Whether we choose to speak of alienation or not, the experiences widely associated with that term are often held to be distinctive characteristics of our time, or of capitalistic societies; but we shall see that they are actually encountered in abundance in past ages and in noncapitalistic societies.

Then I shall criticize Marx's dream of an unalienated society as well as the fashionable notion that things have never been worse than they are now. Marx's vastly influential restriction of our term to destructive conditions will be seen to be open to serious objections. Neither will it do to restrict the term to fruitful estrangement. Alienation is neither a

disease nor a blessing but, for better or worse, a central feature of human existence.

1. Historical Perspective

"Alienation" came into its own during the Cold War, as a meeting place for East and West, for Marxism and existentialism. In *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Erich Fromm, who later did as much as anyone to popularize the term, used it a couple of times (pp. 119, 151), and some of the phenomena to which he later applied it are discussed at some length (117 ff.), but the word was not considered worth listing in the index. And it was only during the 1960s that the term gained entrance into philosophical dictionaries.

This is odd because Hegel used the term frequently, and in his first book, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), one whole chapter, over a hundred pages in length, bore the title "Spirit alienated from itself. Culture." This was followed by a chapter on "Spirit certain of itself. Morality." That alienation was not discussed in the English-speaking world even during the heyday of Anglo-American Idealism is not surprising, because the Idealists concentrated on Hegel's later works and generally paid little attention to the *Phenomenology*. It is not so easy to explain why the German Hegel literature also neglected this theme. Hermann Glockner did not list the two German words for alienation, *Entfremdung* and *Entäusserung*, in his four-volume *Hegel-Lexikon* (1935-39), and Johannes Hoffmeister did not include them either in the index of his scholarly edition of the *Phänomenologie* (1952) or in his immensely learned *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe* (2d ed., 1955). That Hegel used two terms and that both were colored strongly by his conception of the development of spirit, does not really explain why this whole complex of ideas received so little attention for so long. It was the case of an idea whose time had not come.

The one great exception confirms this view. Karl Marx, who was thirteen years old when Hegel died in 1831, was fascinated by this aspect of Hegel's philosophy when he came to study it twelve years later. In his "Philosophical Manuscripts"

of 1844 we encounter long discussions of *Entfremdung* and *Enttäusserung*, but most of this material was not published until 1932, and in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx specifically denounced talk of alienation as "philosophical nonsense."¹

Even in 1932 the time was not yet ripe for "alienation." Less than a year after the publication of Marx's early manuscripts the Nazis came to power in Germany and put an end to scholarly discussions of Marx's thought. And the Soviet hierarchy accepted the view of "alienation" put forth in *The Communist Manifesto*. (The ideas of the young Marx will be considered briefly below.)

Martin Buber had spoken of *Verfremdung* in his long discussion of "the proliferation of the It-world" in Part Two of *Ich und Du* (1923). In retrospect, we can even say that most of Part Two deals with alienation; but the term was not and did not become a slogan; neither did the book trigger any widespread discussion of alienation. For a quarter of a century the influence of the book was confined largely to Protestant theologians.

Later, Bertolt Brecht developed an anti-Aristotelian poetics and spoke of a *Verfremdungseffekt* or, for short, *V-Effekt*. He meant that the audience should not be taken in by an illusion: Dramatists should go out of their way to remind the audience that it is in a theater, watching a play. In this sense, the playwright should alienate the audience or keep it detached: He should forestall emotional identification.

Others, too, had spoken of *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*, but before World War II these terms did not catch on any more than "alienation" did in the English-speaking world. It was only when the world was divided into two camps that Marxism and existentialism sought common ground in discussions of alienation.

¹ In section III.1.c: "*Die deutschen Literaten* [a disparaging term for writers] . . . *schrrieben ihren philosophischen Unsinn hinter das französische Original. Zum Beispiel hinter die französische Kritik der Geldverhältnisse schrieben sie 'Enttäusserung des menschlichen Wesens' . . .*"

To begin with Marxism, the publication of Marx's early manuscripts was a godsend for Georg Lukács, the Hungarian critic who in the fifties and sixties came to be more widely admired in the West than any other Marxist theoretician. In the twenties the Communist Party in the Soviet Union had vilified him for his Hegelian deviations from true Marxism. When the Nazis came to power, he fled to the Soviet Union, abjured his heresies, abased himself, and paid ample tribute to Stalin. At the same time, he went to work on a long German book, which was finished substantially in 1938 and published after thorough revision in 1948: *Der junge Hegel* (The Young Hegel). The final section of this volume bore the title: "Entäusserung as the [or: a] central philosophical concept of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*."

In these final thirty-five pages Lukács made the stone that the builders had rejected for one hundred and forty years the chief cornerstone of Hegel's first book, which by that time had come to be widely considered Hegel's most original and brilliant work. But of the forty footnotes that support Lukács' argument in this section, only six refer to Hegel's writings, while two refer to Lenin, two to Engels—and twenty-one to Karl Marx.

The modern interest in Hegel's and Marx's discussions of alienation seems to date from this book. This is rather odd, because the final section of the volume obviously has to be understood in the context of Lukács' troubled career—as an elaborate attempt at self-justification. His own Hegelianism was not to be considered a deviation, after all; Hegel had been misunderstood; "alienation" was central in his thought—no less than in Marx's. Of course, "alienation" was not to be found in the books Marx himself published—except where he expressly condemned those who used the term—but it was central in his early manuscripts, and these in turn provided the key for the correct interpretation of his mature thought.

The strategy is transparent, and Stalin's functionaries were not persuaded. It seems scarcely credible that the modern vogue of "alienation" should derive from such an unpromising beginning. It seems even less likely when one considers that Lukács stressed *Entäusserung* rather than *Entfremdung*, although, like Hegel and Marx, he used both terms.

As long as we see Lukács' predicament as entirely personal, it does not seem possible to make sense of the development that actually followed in the fifties and sixties. But what had prompted his deviationism in the first place was his humanist background and his early affinity to existentialism. It has even been suggested that some of Heidegger's most characteristic concerns, including the distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence, were derived from Lukács' early work, although Lukács himself has said, more plausibly, that "the problem was in the air." And he himself has said that "Kierkegaard played a considerable role in my early development; in the last years before the War [i.e., before 1914] in Heidelberg I even planned to write a monograph on his critique of Hegel."² Lukács was also strongly influenced by Georg Simmel and by Max Weber; and Weber, though remembered chiefly as a sociologist of genius, also exerted a formative influence on Karl Jaspers. Lukács had never wanted to renounce his roots, and the humanism of the young Marx provided, at long last, a desperately needed bridge for some rapprochement between Marxism on the one hand and existentialism and humanism on the other.

Meanwhile, some Western writers who were more or less close to existentialism were looking for ways to effect a rapprochement with Marxism, and they, too, seized on the manuscripts of the young Marx and "alienation."

Herbert Marcuse, who had dedicated his first book to Heidegger, under whom he had studied, actually beat Lukács to the punch. Lukács, writing in German, could not publish his Hegel book until 1948, while Marcuse, writing in English in the United States, published *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* in 1941, making ample use of Marx's early manuscripts and devoting a good deal of attention to alienation. This may actually be the first book whose index includes "Alienation (*Entfremdung*)," although it should be noted that the index in John Baillie's English version of Hegel's *Phenomenology* lists "Alienation from self (spiritual)," followed by a reference to Hegel's discussion of

² *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, preface to the 1968 edition (*Werke*, vol. II), pp. 24 and 11.

the "unhappy consciousness," and "Estrangement (self)," followed by two references to the chapter mentioned above.

Karl Löwith, who had also studied with Heidegger, included some discussion of alienation in his *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche* (1941), written in exile in Japan and published in German in New York and Zürich. Here the concept was not central, as in Lukács and Marcuse; but the chapter on *Arbeit* (work or labor) included two *Referate* (reports alternating between paraphrase and quotation) on "Hegel: labor as self-alienation [*Entäußerung seiner selbst*] in the forming of the world" and on "Marx: labor as self-estrangement [*Selbstentfremdung*] of man in a world he does not own." Löwith's book contained a great many chapters that were easily as important as the one on labor, and the whole volume was studded with reports on the views not only of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche but also of a great many lesser writers. It could hardly have served to attract attention to alienation. But Marcuse's book might have—and did not: The time was not yet ripe.

Although Marcuse did not publish another book for the next fourteen years and went to work for the O.S.S. and the U.S. Department of State from 1941 till 1950, the discussion of Marx followed his lead and Lukács'. Sidney Hook's *From Hegel to Marx* suddenly belonged to a bygone era, although it had been published only five years earlier, in 1936; for it made no mention of alienation.

In the fifties a few refugees from Germany and Austria naturalized "alienation" in the United States. Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society* (1955), Erich Kahler's *The Tower and the Abyss* (1957), and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) made constant mention of it—and the indices of these books include numerous references to it. That in Fromm's *Sane Society*, for example, includes, *inter alia*, pages 111–70 and 170–84 (of the paperback edition).

Hannah Arendt, like Marcuse, had long been under the spell of Heidegger, although she is widely associated with Karl Jaspers, to whom she was close personally. Paul Tillich, who also contributed to the vogue of "alienation," frequently

stressed his affinity with existentialism. Kahler and Fromm lacked any distinctly existentialist background: They were, in different ways, humanists.

This sudden explosion of interest in estrangement was preceded by the appearance of a paperback edition of *The Stranger* in 1954. Camus had published *L'Étranger* in 1942, and Stuart Gilbert's translation had come out in 1946, but it was only the paperback edition that made this short novel one of the most influential books of the mid-century: The protagonist became one of the heroes of a new generation.

In Germany the concept of alienation began to attract a great deal of popular attention after Marx's early writings appeared in a popular edition in 1953 (*Die Frühschriften*, ed. Siegfried Landshut). But it is noteworthy that one of Jaspers' students had been one of the very few who had addressed themselves to this problem before: Heinrich Popitz, whose dissertation *Der entfremdete Mensch* (subtitled "The Young Marx's Critique of the Age and Philosophy of History") appeared the same year.

It was Fromm who introduced Marx's early manuscripts to the American public. The way in which he did this, in 1961, speaks volumes about the transformation of the American scene in the course of the sixties.

Marx's early manuscripts were published under Fromm's name, not Marx's: Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*. The book's title was also the title of Fromm's introductory essay, which was followed by a selection from the manuscripts themselves. Perhaps this was not merely a reflection of Fromm's ego; it may also have been a symptom of the aftermath of the McCarthy period. A publisher could still be persuaded that Fromm's name would have a far wider appeal than Marx's. It was also symptomatic that Fromm said at the outset: "Marx's philosophy, like much of existentialist thinking, represents a protest against man's alienation, his loss of himself and his transformation into a thing; it is a movement against the dehumanization and automatization of man inherent in the development of Western industrialism."

Lukács had tried to make his early existentialist leanings respectable by appealing to the young Marx. In the United

States Marx was made more appealing by attempts to show that he had much in common with existentialism.

Lukács' approach no longer seemed self-serving. Before the discovery of the "Philosophical Manuscripts," it had been hard to find much philosophy in Marx, and writers of an earlier generation had often found themselves compelled to turn to Engels instead. It was even harder to find much concern for the individual human being in countries with Communist governments. For all who felt distressed on either or both of these counts, the *young* Marx spelled salvation. In his manuscripts one found detailed criticisms of Hegel along with attempts to work out a different philosophy; and now it became a commonplace that these early writings and not Engels' later works revealed Marx's true philosophy. But, above all, one could now quote Marx himself in support of protests that would previously have suggested Western bourgeois influences. In France and Germany, in Poland and Yugoslavia, "alienation" became central in the discussion of Marxism; and in the United States the word became so ubiquitous that it was no longer clear whether the myriad uses to which it was put allowed for any single definition.

Fromm used the term in as many different senses as anyone. At one point in his essay "Marx's Concept of Man" he says: "the concept of alienation is, in nontheistic language, the equivalent of what in theistic language would be called 'sin'" (p. 46); and the one common denominator of virtually all of Fromm's uses of the word is that he is against alienation. Most, but not all, writers agree in deploring alienation and in considering it a distinctively modern phenomenon. When it is admitted that alienation can be found in the past, too, this concession is generally followed by the claim that in our time it is much more extreme or even "total."

The diagnoses of the ills of our time that were put forward in the seminal books of the fifties seemed wrong to me, but I felt that a new analysis ought to be coupled with a detailed critical survey of the literature on alienation. Now that Schacht has provided the critical review, the time has come to reconsider the phenomena to which the term has been applied.

2. Analysis

The verb "alienate" is transitive like its two German equivalents, and its literal meaning is "to make strange, to make another's." But the noun "alienation," like the German *Entfremdung* and unlike *Entäusserung*, does not usually bring to mind an activity, except in special contexts where it functions as a technical term. Our primary association with "alienation" and *Entfremdung* is a human state of being—the state of *being* alienated or estranged from something or somebody. And it is phenomena of this sort that I propose to discuss now.

We are concerned with a relationship between A and B. A is a person or a group of persons: an individual, a social class, a whole generation, a people, or perhaps a smaller group. A is usually specified, and if there is any great vagueness, it rarely results from failure to indicate who A is. But B also needs to be specified, and confusion frequently and typically results from the failure to specify from whom or what A is supposed to be alienated. "Alienation" is an elliptical term that requires completion in *two* directions.

What might B be? An individual (for example, one's father, wife, or child); a group (perhaps one's family, fellow employees, fellow students, teachers, employers, colleagues, or neighbors); other people in general; the society in which one lives (for example, American or Soviet society); oneself (perhaps especially one's body or some particular aspect of one's character or of one's past); nature (hardly a univocal term, but possibly in the sense in which we speak of nature lovers); or, finally, the universe.

This is not an exhaustive list. One can also be alienated from what one does (from one's activity, work, or labor) or from things (such as the products of one's labor). The young Marx stressed both of these forms of alienation along with man's alienation from his essence or true nature—a concept that was central in his thought in 1844. While Marx uses "alienation" in several different senses, the phenomenon that concerns him most is the dehumanization of man. Man's loss of independence, his impoverishment, his estrangement from

his fellow men, and his involvement in labor that is devoid of any originality, spontaneity, or creativity are so many aspects of man's estrangement from his true nature. Whether man has an essence is, of course, questionable; and seeing how Marx's early manuscripts have been used to bring him closer to existentialism, it is ironical that nobody has argued more passionately that man has no essence than has Jean-Paul Sartre.

Yet the young Marx and the early Sartre are not by any means diametrically opposed. In his early existentialist phase Sartre made much of his distinction between the being of things (*en soi*) and the human mode of being (*pour soi*). Man, he said, lacked the solidity of things; man was condemned to be free. He showed in detail, not only in his philosophical works but also in his short stories, novels, and plays, how men constantly succumb to bad faith, hiding their freedom from themselves and seeing themselves as if they were things. His extravagant emphasis on man's complete freedom was certainly at odds not only with Marxism but also with the facts of life; and, more than any other single factor, it was his growing awareness of the hollowness of this rhetoric and of the ways in which the oppressed and starving are not completely free—his social conscience, in brief—that led him to his later rapprochement with Marxism. But even his earlier philosophy could have been formulated in terms of a concept of human nature. The main difference between the young Marx and the early Sartre is not that one has such a concept while the other rejects it; it is rather that Sartre concentrates on the psychological processes that lead men to see themselves as objects, as things, as unfree, while Marx concerns himself with the economic processes that lead to much the same result. Both are concerned with man's loss of his freedom, but Marx sees the unfree as victims while the early Sartre insists that we are our own victims, that we really are free, and that we are at fault for not realizing it.

Thus one could also speak of alienation from freedom. And for those who believe in God or gods there may also be alienation from God or gods. But to speak of alienation without making clear who is held to be alienated from whom or from what is hardly fruitful, and talk of the "total" alienation of

modern man is as nonsensical as talk of the total absence of alienation.

What comes to mind most often when we hear of alienation is estrangement from other men—usually from one's society. If anything at all could be said to be alienation *par excellence*, this would be it. We shall therefore use this kind of experience as an example to make a more general point about alienation.

We must ask not only from whom or what a person or group is supposed to be alienated but also what would constitute the absence of this alienation. Would a nonalienated person find no group of people, no individuals, nothing about the society in which he lived strange in any way at all? If so, could one really call him a person? And if one did, would one not have to add that his condition was severely pathological and bordered on idiocy?

Self-consciousness involves a sense of what is other—*alienum* in Latin. If anyone literally found nothing human alien to himself, he would be totally lacking in any sense of selfhood. (Terence's beautiful line, *Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*³—I am a man, and I hold nothing human strange to me—refers not to the total absence but to the overcoming of a sense of strangeness: a triumph that involves imagination and understanding, not imbecility.) If anyone could not tell a strange hand from his own and actually experienced the one just as he did the other, we might as well say that he experienced his own hand as strange and was alienated from himself and, more specifically, from his own body.

Have we illicitly confounded otherhood and strangeness? A person whom I know to be other than myself need not seem strange to me. He may be a familiar sight—always at the same street corner at 9 A.M., or a waiter I usually see when I go to a certain restaurant, or a well-known actor, politician, or other public personage. He is no stranger nor strange to me: I know him. But how well do I know him? I simply do not care enough to think about the 99 percent of

³ *Heauton Timorumenos* (163 B.C.), I.1.25.

him that is for me *terra incognita*. We are strangers but not sufficiently interested to realize it or be bothered by it, and one might well hesitate to speak of alienation or estrangement in such cases lest one be taken to imply that there was a prior state of closer rapport.

Now suppose I am suddenly struck by the fact that I hardly know this person. This could happen as we began to talk to each other. I might never have hesitated to say, "I know him"; but now that I know him a little better, I might come to feel that I really do not know him at all and that he is quite strange.

This paradox may seem to be reducible to the double meanings of "know" and "strange." As Hegel pointed out, what is *bekannt*, or known by acquaintance and hence familiar, is not necessarily *erkannt*, or known in the sense of being comprehended. But that is not all. Familiarity actually obstructs knowledge, and comprehension involves the overcoming of a sense of strangeness. This point, too, is central in Hegel's thought.

Another image may make it clearer. It is hard to see in perspective and comprehend what is very close to us: Comprehension requires some distance and consists in a triumph over distance. Thus Oedipus, who solved the riddle of the Sphinx about the human condition, did not recognize his father and mother and did not grasp his relation to his wife and children. And Freud failed to perceive the psychological problems of his favorite disciples, Sandor Ferenczi and Otto Rank. Similarly, it is often easier to understand other people's problems than our own. In these cases, of course, emotional involvement may blind us. But the same phenomenon can be observed when a play, a painting, or a piece of music is exceedingly familiar to us: We lack distance and must become alienated if we would comprehend it.

Plato and Aristotle remarked that philosophy begins in wonder or perplexity. We could also say that it begins when something suddenly strikes us as strange—or that philosophy is born of estrangement. It need not be alienation from other human beings; it could be estrangement from oneself or the universe. Or a belief or system of beliefs, a moral conviction or a code that we had taken for granted may suddenly seem

strange to us. Such alienation need not be a merely intellectual event; it may involve a deep estrangement from the faith and morals of our society.

It may seem a *reductio ad absurdum* to speak of alienation when a child begins to ask questions about all sorts of things that but a few months earlier had not struck him as at all strange and that most Philistines would not dream of questioning. For it is clearly the child who does *not* ask questions that one has to worry about; and alienation of this type is a symptom of mental health, while lack of it is pathological. Those who assume that alienation is by definition regrettable would not think of applying the term to a healthy child. But adolescence is our second childhood; and when students start asking questions about their schools and the societies in which they live, it is often said that they are alienated. A healthy child ought not to be satisfied with the reply that this is simply how things are. Should an adolescent be content with such an answer?

Some people, no doubt, would apply the term to adolescents only by way of registering regret or disapproval. But in purely descriptive terms, the adolescent who gains a sense of distance experiences a gulf between himself and all sorts of things and people, and he feels estranged. The curiosity of the small child who asks questions is not so regularly accompanied by a deep sense of alienation.

Most writers who make much of alienation consider it a distinctively modern phenomenon—and deplore it. We have suggested, in effect, that they are wrong on both counts. Later we shall return to the question whether the term ought to be restricted to destructive conditions. But let us first examine with some care whether alienation is, after all, a distinguishing feature of our times, and perhaps, as many writers would have it, confined to capitalistic societies.

At this point we must not stretch the meaning of the term. The question is whether the conditions that loom so large in the contemporary literature on alienation and in the seminal books published in the fifties can be found in earlier periods and in noncapitalistic societies. One might suppose that those who deplore alienation and blame it on modernity or, more

specifically, on our economic system, would have considered these matters with some care. After all, there is no other way of establishing that their diagnoses are right; and if they are wrong, their prescriptions would scarcely merit much attention.

What is needed is historical perspective. But although the vogue of "alienation" has its roots in the early writings of the founder of so-called historical materialism, one of the most striking features of the vast literature on alienation is its historical blindness. That class alienation is to be found in former ages, that we encounter slavery, slave rebellions, and revolutions, is so obvious—and was so plain to Marx—that the point does not need laboring. But we have argued that philosophy is born of alienation. Let us begin our historical reflections with philosophy and then turn to literature.

3. Alienated Philosophers

Plato is the first philosopher known to us by complete works and not mere fragments. He is also widely considered the greatest philosopher of all time, and his dialogues are in a very substantial sense the foundation of all subsequent Western philosophy. Was he "alienated"?

His alienation from society does not have to be inferred from our reflections on the origin of philosophy, nor need we rely on scattered quotations from his writings. Consider his major work on social and political philosophy, *The Republic*, which is generally held to be his *magnum opus*. It is the work of a man estranged from Athenian society and from the politics and morals of his time. He is disaffected, disillusioned, and convinced that it would be utterly pointless for him to try to participate in the public life of his city. What is required, he thinks, is not a series of changes that might be brought about within the existing system, nor even a reform of the system. Either kings have to become philosophers, or philosophers, kings: Until "the motley horde of those who at present pursue either [politics or philosophy] apart from the other are excluded by force, there can be no cessation of troubles" for our states or for the human race. Meanwhile Plato describes a city that "can be found nowhere

on earth. . . . But it makes no difference whether it exists now or ever will come into being. The politics of this city only" deserves a philosopher's attention.⁴

Whether Plato was also alienated from himself is more difficult to decide because the notion of alienation from oneself is less clear. But more than once Plato cites approvingly an ancient play on words that was dear to the Orphic sect: The body (*soma*) is the soul's tomb (*sema*). This means that the soul is buried in the body, that life is one long exile, and that salvation is to be found only in death. To be a self is to be a stranger.

Plato does not merely divide man into body and soul; he further divides the soul into three parts, and he argues for the existence of the three parts by calling attention to instances in which they are at odds with each other and pull us in different directions. Thus Plato also knew the experience of the divided self. He felt at home neither in his body nor with his appetites.

These references to self-alienation are crucial for Plato's position. He offers a path to salvation and tells us how such alienation could ultimately be overcome. But it remains doubtful at best whether it can ever be overcome in this life. Perhaps Socrates overcame it in the hour of his death, described at the end of the *Phaedo*. But it is clearly part of the point of *The Republic* that in the kind of society then existing anywhere a triumph over self-alienation could not be expected by many, if any.

What about alienation from nature? This notion is far from clear. But if we assume, however naïvely, that some peasants or primitive peoples are in tune with nature, at home in it, close to the earth, and not alienated, then it must be said that Plato, like Socrates, his master, *was* alienated from nature. At the beginning of the *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates admit that he hardly ever leaves the city to walk in the countryside: "I am a lover of learning, and trees and countryside won't teach me anything, while men in the city do." Socrates compares himself to an animal that can be led

⁴ *The Republic* 473 and 592. I have slightly modified Paul Shorey's translation.

if you dangle a carrot in front of it: He can be got out of the city if you dangle a book in front of him.

There is no evidence that Plato felt more intimate with nature than did Socrates. His path to salvation required men to regard their senses as deceivers, sense experience as an illusion, and nature as unreal. To be saved, we must turn our backs upon nature and attune our minds first to mathematical concepts and then, eventually, to dialectic. We must not seek to feel at home in *this* world; we have to become convinced of its unreality and place our trust in another world that lies beyond all sense experience, beyond change and time.

The point here is not that "alienation" is the *mot juste* for Plato's attitudes or condition, but rather that phenomena now frequently subsumed under this concept by writers who consider them distinctively modern, were, in fact, eminently characteristic of Plato.

We know more about Plato than about any of his philosophic predecessors. At most, we have fragments of their works, and it is hazardous to venture opinions about their personal condition. None of them comes to life for us as a personality as does Heraclitus of Ephesus. And he said of his fellow citizens: "The Ephesians would do well to hang themselves, every adult man, and leave their city to adolescents, since they expelled Hermodorus, the worthiest man among them, saying: 'Let us have not even one worthy man; but if we do, let him go elsewhere and live among others!'" (fragment 121). How is that for estrangement from the popular culture of his day and an expression of despair of all but the young? (In the nineteen sixties we got the cliché of trusting "no one over thirty.")

Heraclitus' remarks about the culture heroes of his time—Homer and Hesiod, Pythagoras and Xenophanes—evince quite as much bitterness. Of course, we need not label these attitudes as alienation from society; but if that term is used for modern attitudes of this kind and it is assumed that alienation from society must be prompted by specifically modern causes, then the case of Heraclitus becomes relevant.

Few modern writers are as dear to those who consider themselves alienated as Hermann Hesse. The novel that

marked Hesse's breakthrough to his own distinctive voice was *Demian*, published over a pseudonym in 1919 and not recognized at first as being by him. Its epigraph was a variation on one of Heraclitus' best-known aphorisms, "I sought myself": "I did not want anything but to try to live what wanted all on its own to come out of myself. Why was that so very difficult?" This is also the theme of Hesse's later novels—and a way of saying that alienation from oneself is hard to overcome.

Not all of the pre-Socratics were loners like Heraclitus. Pythagoras, in the late sixth century B.C., may have been a solitary figure, but his followers, the Pythagoreans, formed a sect. During the fifth century B.C., when Athens became a great power and produced the temples on the Acropolis before she was plunged into the Peloponnesian War; during the whole age of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—the Pythagoreans lived their withdrawn life in a commune in southern Italy. It was probably from them that Plato received the Orphic notion of the body as the tomb of the soul along with their doctrine of the transmigration of souls, the notion that a philosophic life is required for salvation, and that the right kind of society can be a vehicle of redemption. Plato was also influenced by their admission of women to their society, by their practice of holding all property in common, and by their division of mankind into three basic types—with tradesmen the lowest class; those in whom the desire to excel is highly developed, superior; and those who prefer contemplation, the best.

It would be tedious to go through the whole history of philosophy to assemble an imposing array of illustrations of alienation. One final example may suffice, so long as we choose the man most widely regarded as the greatest non-Greek philosopher: Kant.

Like Socrates, he did not care to leave his city and wander in the country. He was totally alienated from nature. And, like Plato, he considered it not ultimately real. He, too, believed that there were two worlds, and he sought freedom and immortality—and God, if any—in the other world.

Such otherworldliness is usually a sign of alienation from this world, from concrete human society, and from one's empirical self. This self is not ultimately real; my freedom and unique worth depend on another dimension, which Kant called *noumenal*.

As in Plato, the self encountered in moral experience is divided against itself. One of Kant's greatest admirers, Friedrich Schiller, aptly parodied this aspect of Kant's moral philosophy in two distichs:

CONSCIENTIOUS SCRUPLE

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas out of inclination;
And though this pains me oft, virtuous I am not.

DECISION

There is no other counsel, but you have to try to despise it
And with abhorrence do that which your duty commands.

One need not speak of self-alienation when discussing Kant's ethics, but it is essential to recognize that this Kantian division of the self—this sense of estrangement from one's own natural inclinations—was precisely what first Schiller and then Hegel tried to overcome by developing a different ethic. In fact, Hegel went on to develop a different conception of man and his place in the world, of spirit, and of the nature of reality. This is the context in which Hegel's discussion of alienation has its place.

An altogether different approach also suggests that the great philosophers were deeply "alienated" in an important sense. Who were the greatest philosophers of modern times? There is a surprising consensus about the answer: Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz; Pascal and Hume; Rousseau and Kant; Hegel and Nietzsche; Russell and Sartre. No doubt, many people would want to add three or four men to this list, but few indeed would deny that these philosophers are among the most interesting and influential.

Descartes lost his mother when he was one year old; Spinoza was six when his mother died, and Leibniz six when his father died. Pascal's mother died when he was three; Hume's father, when he was three. Rousseau's mother died

soon after his birth, and when he was ten his father left him. Both Kant and Hegel lost their mothers at thirteen. Nietzsche was four when he lost his father. Russell's mother died when he was two; his father, two years later. And Sartre lost his father at two.⁵

In his first *Duino Elegy* Rilke says that "we are not very reliably at home in the interpreted world." This has often been taken for a formulation of a very modern *malaise*. But our data create a strong presumption that this feeling was shared by the major philosophers since Descartes; and their works bear this out—most obviously in the cases of Descartes, Pascal, and Hume; Rousseau, Kant, and Nietzsche; Russell and Sartre. Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hegel seem much less skeptical. But closer study of Hegel reveals that what he sought and eventually found in philosophy was a triumph over an unbearable sense of alienation. Having decided in his twenties that religion could not grant him such salvation, he turned to philosophy and, after years of struggle, obtained through it a sense of reconciliation. One might hesitate to speak of alienation in this context, had not Hegel bequeathed this term to us precisely in this context. I suspect that the cases of Spinoza and Leibniz are essentially similar.

4. Literature and Art

Great philosophers are by definition unrepresentative men. But those we have considered have been very widely read and acclaimed, and generations of students have immersed themselves in their books. Great writers are also atypical men; yet it is a commonplace that contemporary writers are alienated, and "alienation" looms large in book reviews and literary criticism. Usually the word is used so loosely that it seems best, if one takes such writing seriously at all, to point out how vague and ambiguous the term is, and in how many different senses it has been and is used. But it may also prove illuminating if we show, at least very briefly, how central some of the phenomena in question have been in the works

⁵ My friend Ben-Ami Scharfstein, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Tel-Aviv University, called most of these data to my attention in another context.

of some great writers of the past. As in the case of the philosophers, we shall confine our attention to men and works of the very first rank, and we shall eschew such obvious outsiders as Euripides and Villon, Poe and Baudelaire.

Goethe may serve as our first example. If rebellion against the establishment were a sign of alienation, we should have to consider the young Goethe a paradigm of alienation. Werther, the hero of his first novel, committed suicide—and all over Europe large numbers of young people committed suicide with a copy of the book clutched in their hands or buried in a pocket. Goetz, the hero of Goethe's storm-and-stress play, uttered the most celebrated obscenity in German literature, showing the poet's contempt for convention. Both works were antiestablishmentarian—and became instant successes that made the author the hero of the younger generation.

Does it make sense to consider Faust's wholehearted disgust with academic learning proof of his—or the poet's—alienation? Hardly. But that is how our contemporaries frequently use the term. Or consider Faust's famous outcry, quoted and discussed at length in Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*:

Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast,
And one is striving to forsake its brother.

Is this division of the self a sign of alienation? It certainly prevents one from feeling at home with oneself, as each soul eyes the other as a stranger. But if that is alienation, who is *not* alienated? Surely, this goes with having any spiritual depth at all, or any spirit.

If we associate alienation primarily with a deep sense of estrangement from one's fellow men and from society, then the stage in life at which Goethe became a paradigm of alienation coincides precisely with the period of his greatest fame, when he is widely held to have been a pillar of the establishment. From the start, *Faust* had been written with an utter disregard for the possibility of performance on the stage. When Goethe became director of the theater in Weimar, a great variety of plays and operas were performed, but

never *Faust*. Goethe had started writing the play in the 1770s; he had published a fragment in 1790; and the whole of Part One appeared in 1808. But Part One was never staged in public until 1829, when Goethe turned eighty and people wanted to honor him, and even then the play was cut severely. The first performance of nearly the whole of Part One took place in 1876.

The Second Part was not intended to be staged at all. And when it was finished, not long before Goethe died—sixty years after he had begun the project—he tied up the manuscript and sealed it, refusing to divulge the conclusion even to old and trusted friends. He had no wish to see his *magnum opus* performed; he did not want to have it published until after he was dead; and he had no desire to share it with anyone. If that is not alienation from society, what is?

“Ah,” some people may retort, “the *modern* writer’s alienation is far more profound. Although James Joyce, for example, published what he wrote, he was so alienated that he might just as well not have, because there simply was no public for him until after he was dead.” But this simply is not true in the case of *Ulysses* (1922), which came to be admired internationally long before the author’s death in 1941; nor did *Finnegans Wake* (1939) have to wait long for commentaries and a great deal of critical attention. Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954), widely hailed as a landmark of alienation, became an almost instant classic, read and seen on the stage, uncut, by large numbers of people in a great many different countries. Goethe, on the other hand, knew well that *Faust II* could never become popular, and that he would be much happier not reading what scholars and critics would write about it. In fact, the work was much farther ahead of its time than were Joyce’s and Beckett’s masterpieces: roughly, a hundred years.

Goethe lived at least on the threshold of modernity. Let us take as our second literary example the greatest poet of the Middle Ages: Dante. After all, the Middle Ages are often viewed nostalgically as a happier time when all was harmony and integration. There is no need here to dwell on the dark side of that period, its superstition and inhumanity, as evi-

denced, for example, in the persecution of Jews and heretics. Dante was a paradigm of alienation. His *Vita Nuova* is a case study of self-alienation—of viewing oneself as a stranger. And his *Divina Commedia* is the work of an outsider, literally an exile, consumed by bitterness. He creates a vast hell to people it with his fellow men, including members of the Establishment.

If alienation is associated rather more with being artistically out of touch with one's time, and what is meant is inaccessibility, the description also fits Dante perfectly. How many of his contemporaries could possibly have fathomed his work? And how many, since his time?

Those who look back nostalgically to some past period generally single out either Dante's age or fifth-century Athens. Let us therefore choose our next example from the great period of Greek literature: Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

Sophocles appears to be the archetype of the nonalienated poet: He was vastly appreciated by his contemporaries, and his tragedies usually won first prize, often second, and never placed third. He also held important offices and was highly respected as a man. *Oedipus Tyrannus* was soon accepted as a masterpiece, and Aristotle admired it as perhaps the best tragedy ever written. That estimate still stands. At the same time, it is plain that the continued appeal of the play is due not only to Sophocles' superb craftsmanship and plot construction but also to the central figure of the play, who, particularly as conceived by Sophocles, continues to haunt men's minds. We feel that in some sense he represents us; that his tragedy, though larger than life, is ours—but not necessarily in the way Freud suggested.

Oedipus is alienation incarnate. His father was warned by the gods not to have children, and Oedipus came into the world unwanted. Hence his ankles were pierced and he was cast out into hostile nature to perish. Saved by a shepherd, he was brought up in Corinth, a stranger without realizing it. To avoid defiling nature and violating the most sacred harmonies of the universe, he left Corinth to go into voluntary exile. Nevertheless he committed what the Greeks—and

not only the Greeks—considered the most unnatural acts, outraging nature as well as society.

In Thebes, of which he was a native, he assumed that he was an alien. And when he discovered who he was, what he had done, and that he was not a stranger at all, he asked to be thrown out of the city.

Can we consider such an imperious and proud man alienated from himself? If one were to seek an epigraph for Sophocles' play, one could not do better than quote Heraclitus: "I sought myself." Oedipus is a stranger to himself; and when he discovers who he is, he is filled with such loathing that he destroys his own eyes. He even says that he wishes he could destroy his hearing, too, cutting his last bonds to the world and to his fellow men.

Whoever wants to understand alienation or wonders whether it is an essentially modern phenomenon, should reflect on the perennial fascination of this tragedy. Would it have haunted men so much if alienation from the universe, society, and oneself had been foreign to most men until recently?

If there is another play that has fascinated men as much as *Oedipus Tyrannus*, it is surely *Hamlet*. And if there is another hero who totally dominates a drama with his pervasive sense of alienation, it is Hamlet.

Perhaps all tragedies deal with alienation in some way: It is impossible to decide that without a clear idea of what precisely counts or does not count as alienation. But Hamlet displays almost every conceivable form of alienation. He views himself, his fellow men, and the society in which he lives with loathing. And generations of readers have identified with him. If they have included a high percentage of young people, writers, and artists, it is worth asking whether these groups have not always been prone to feel rather intensely what is nowadays called alienation.

It may be objected that formerly relatively few writers and artists felt deeply alienated, while in our century many do. This question is complicated by the fact that today there are so many more writers and artists than there have ever been

before. Also, we lack detailed information about the lives and personalities of writers and artists of past ages, especially about the multitude of those who were not of the first rank. This makes comparisons difficult. But it seems that examples both of deeply alienated and of not so deeply alienated artists and writers can be found in former ages as well as in the twentieth century. Thus, Leonardo and Michelangelo seem to have felt much more profoundly alienated than, say, Rodin and Renoir. But such comparisons of exceptional and, hence, unrepresentative men are hardly to the point. Those who make much of alienation usually have in mind large groups of people.

It may therefore be more relevant to ask whether alienation does not characterize the modern public's attitude rather than the artist's. It is often suggested that the public no longer sees works of art as paintings or sculptures; instead, the works are seen as marketable commodities, investments, or status symbols. Thus modern man is estranged from art. This is the line taken by many critics of capitalistic society.

It sounds plausible—unless one has seen, for example, a traveling Van Gogh exhibition both in Warsaw and in Tel-Aviv (in 1962–63). In Warsaw it was scarcely attended at all, and the intellectual community took no notice of it, while in Tel-Aviv the doors had to be kept open till midnight and the crowds were immense. Many people came again and again; many a visitor contemplated the same picture for a long time. Of course, none of the paintings was for sale.

It is easy to find instances of alienation in modern capitalistic societies, but there is no evidence that people in Communist countries have a more intimate relationship to art. Nor is it at all clear that the attitude toward art which is so often characterized as alienated and modern is particularly modern. Did not the pharaohs of Egypt and the kings of Europe, the Renaissance patrons and popes, and the wealthy citizens of northern Europe look on paintings and sculptures as status symbols?

Beethoven made a great point of seeing his art, himself, and artists in general, in a new light. Of course, this does not mean that he felt less alienated than did his predecessors.

On the contrary, he felt almost unbearably alienated; and his Heiligenstadt Testament bears eloquent witness to the way in which his deafness contributed to his profound sense of estrangement from other men. One could argue that those who had treated artists in the manner against which Beethoven protested so successfully, had been less alienated from art than were the public of the late nineteenth century and our own contemporaries. Today, the artist is a person apart, and art and music are no longer amenities.

The term "alienation" has been used so indiscriminately that it is not clear who is supposed to be alienated: the minority who read Kafka and Euripides with understanding, or those who consider Edward Albee and Andy Warhol great, or perhaps the vast majority who read *Reader's Digest* and an occasional best seller. If the last group, what are we to say of the overwhelming majority of Rembrandt's and Mozart's contemporaries, who never so much as heard of them?

Who is more alienated—a writer in America who in 1970 does not have a television set, or one who spends much of his leisure time watching television? The nonconformist is obviously alienated from his society, but perhaps those who conform are alienated from themselves.

For those who operate with a conception of man's true nature and assume that man is essentially creative, as the young Marx did, it is clear that one who watches television in his spare time is self-alienated—and alienation from oneself is the most basic form of alienation. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that, according to this view, all other evils derive from this.

5. Marx's Dream

The humanism of the young Marx is attractive, and his conviction that the worst feature of modern life is that it dehumanizes man has very wide appeal. But his reasoning is open to several objections.

First, as our examples show, it is naïve to assume that all forms of alienation issue from one root form, and that the person who is liberated from this type of self-alienation will

no longer suffer from any alienation. On the contrary, the creative person is, perhaps even by definition, a nonconformist who questions or deviates from tradition. The more profoundly original he is, the more profoundly is he bound to become alienated from his society.

Secondly, there is a widespread tendency to assume that in preindustrial society men were much less alienated—perhaps not at all—and that they were not only happier and more intimate with nature but also more humane. Those who take this for granted should come to grips with the abundant evidence to the contrary, ranging from the Mayas and the Aztecs to the Cretans of Nikos Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek* and the Indian village of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. And in *The Painted Bird* Jerzy Kosinski has given us not only a shattering picture of a peasant society but also one of the greatest symbols of alienation to be found in world literature. He tells—and this is no invention—of the bird catcher who now and then chose the strongest bird from his cages, painted it in rainbow hues, squeezed it to make it twitter and attract a flock of its own species, and set it free. One after another, the drab birds would attack the painted bird until he dropped to the ground, soaked in blood. The whole book develops this theme.

Finally, consider Marx's famous words from the *German Ideology*: "As soon as the division of labor sets in, everybody has a determinate and exclusive sphere of activity that is imposed on him and from which he cannot escape. He is hunter, fisherman, or shepherd, or critical critic, and must remain that if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood—while in Communist society, where Everybody does not have an exclusive sphere of activity but can train himself in any branch whatever, society regulates general production and thus makes it possible for me to do this today and that tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, to rear cattle in the evening, and to criticize after dinner, as I please, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of our own product into an objective power over us that outgrows our control, crosses our expectations, and nullifies our

calculations, is one of the main features in the development of history so far . . .”⁶

Marx’s dream has not come true in any Communist society, but to a significant degree it is realized in the United States of America. It is not in the least unusual for the same person to have many different jobs before he is thirty. College students, in particular, support themselves in a variety of ways during the academic year, and then, during the summers, work in factories and freight yards, on construction jobs and in offices, doing one sort of thing one summer and another the next. Moreover, it is not at all uncommon for men with all kinds of jobs to find the time to hunt or fish occasionally, and criticism is one of the most popular American sports and undoubtedly indulged in with greater frequency and less inhibitions than in any Communist country. While it is doubtful that many people manage “to rear cattle in the evening,”⁷ this part of Marx’s vision only shows how an inveterate city-dweller imagines bucolic bliss. It might even be taken as evidence of his alienation from nature.

Even if one associates the condition Marx indicts with alienation, it is far from clear what it has to do with capitalism. The division of labor is, as he says, “one of the main features of the development of history so far”; and most of the advances we take for granted depend on it. When we have acute appendicitis, few of us would care to seek help from a man who had not specialized in medicine, and specifically in surgery. And it is not only in medicine that progress depends on specialization and the expertise that goes with that.

What makes it possible for laborers as well as doctors and students to go hunting and fishing is a high standard of living coupled with a short work week—say, five eight-hour days and an annual vacation. Moreover, Social Security and all kinds of pension plans make it possible for large numbers of people to retire early enough in life to spend the rest of their years doing what they please.

⁶ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie* . . . 1845-1846, im Auftrage des Marx-Engels-Lenin Instituts Moskau herausgegeben von V. Adoratskij, Wien/Berlin, 1932, 22 f.

⁷ “*abends Viehzucht zu treiben.*”

Of course, there are large areas of poverty in the United States, and it remains to be seen whether the Government, as presently constituted, will muster the determination to deal with this crucial problem. But whether American society is more of a class society than is Soviet or Polish society, for example, is an altogether different question—not to speak of “third world” countries in which, by and large, the masses live in poverty and Marx’s dream still seems utopian. Above all, it is not at all obvious that alienation is greatest in capitalist countries. It seems that the only way to achieve a sufficiently high standard of living to permit the realization of Marx’s dream leads through the division of labor and the development of a large class of highly skilled experts of various kinds.

Yet the division of labor need not be accompanied by the imposition of rigid roles that dehumanize men. One of the results of the social mobility in the United States—lateral as well as upward—is that a waiter, for example, is much less likely to feel, or to make those on whom he waits feel, that his role defines him, freezes him, and determines his relation to others. For all we know, he may be a college student; and even if he is too old for college, it would be rash to presume that he will still be a waiter a year hence. Moreover, we may have waited on table ourselves, and we may have children who have a similar job right now. Thus the alienation implicit in the division of labor is diminished significantly. Men are much less likely to forget their own humanity and that of others. Clearly, this is only a tendency, and it is possible and highly desirable to go much further in this direction than the United States has yet gone.

There is no evidence that in the Soviet Union or China or any other country that tries to achieve rapid industrialization most jobs are more interesting than in the United States. How many hours a week people must spend on dull jobs to support a family and have the means to go fishing if they please, is an altogether different question; and capitalism is way ahead of communism in this respect.

Here we confront several different issues. First, can we eliminate boring jobs? So far, no society, socialist or capitalist, has solved this problem, and the solution does not seem

to depend on who owns the means of production. It depends on technical developments—specifically, on the future of automation.

Secondly, can we drastically reduce the number of hours per week that anyone has to spend on a boring job? Here the United States and other capitalistic countries have done rather well, and further improvements are in sight.

Thirdly, can we shift people around so that they do not have to do the same boring job all the time? If one had to fish eight hours every day one might well find that very trying, and most men would reach the limit of endurance before long. What makes fishing so attractive to so many Americans is that it is so different from almost everything else they do, and that nobody is breathing down their necks. Could uninteresting jobs be rotated in such a manner that variety would drastically reduce boredom? Clearly, much more could be done along this line, but the resistance to any such change would come mainly from those who would benefit from it. Those who hate routine and have few habits are a very tiny minority. Most men desire amazingly little variety. Witness what they do with their spare time.

Any notion that most men, if given the time, would use it to reread the tragedies of Aeschylus every year, as Karl Marx did, is wildly romantic. And for the charge that only capitalism keeps them from doing this, there is no evidence at all. Not only is Marx's assumption that man has an essence open to question, but his conception of man's true nature was without any broad empirical foundation. He seems to have realized this, at least up to a point, by 1848, but many self-styled socialist humanists still seize uncritically upon his immature early manuscripts.

6. "Things have never been worse"

An idea that is not at all specifically Marxist looms large in the literature on alienation: that things have never been worse. Unless one comes to grips with this notion, one misses much of the import of the current vogue of alienation.

The immense popularity of Martin Buber's *Ich und Du* (1923) during the sixties was due largely to the fact that the

second of its three parts deals at length with alienation and suggests that ours is a sick age. Less and less do men see one another—or a work of art, or a tree—as another You; more and more they relate to their fellow men, to works of art, and to nature as so many objects of experience and use. Young men and women who have read the book more than forty years after it was written consider it prophetic because it seems to describe so perfectly the world in which they live. It does not occur to most of them that the world in which it was written was like that, too—any more than it struck Buber himself that he tended to glorify a past that had not been as different as he occasionally implied it was. He recognized emphatically that men cannot live entirely in I-You relationships, but he did write at times as if the past had known perfect communities not tainted by “sickness”; and like others who speak in this vein, he failed to substantiate or even investigate this assumption.

Of course, things haven't always been as they are now. But have they been better? That remains to be shown, and the demonstration requires both empirical research and value standards. But even if in some clearly specified respects there has been a manifest decline, this could have been accompanied by progress in other important respects.

What we are witnessing is an understandable reaction against the blithe faith in progress that was fashionable in the nineteenth century. But the new anti-faith in the unique alienation of modern man is as unsound and unsophisticated as the old faith in progress. The notion that things were never so good and are constantly getting better, and the notion that things were never so bad and are steadily getting worse, are entirely worthy of each other.

It is ironical that both notions should have been associated so often with Hegel or Marx, for what is wrong with such naïve conceits is that they are so utterly undialectical. People place their faith or anti-faith in a simple proposition without even inquiring why such an assertion may be countered reasonably with a diametrically opposite claim. “Dialectic” is almost as fashionable a word as “alienation,” but few who use it have a clear idea of the meaning of Hegel's dialectic. One knows, of course, that it has something to do

with opposites, but it is usually assumed that it involves a denial of the laws of thought or logic.

In fact, Hegel opposed the dogmatism of those who believe in such simple propositions as, Things were never so good (or so bad). Not only is it the philosopher's task to examine the meaning of "good" and "bad" and the implicit standards; it is also important to inquire how that which has become better is related to that which has become worse. And if we consider that something is very bad, it is simple-minded in the extreme to say that we must obviously get rid of it no matter what the cost. And it shows an appalling lack of imagination, learning, and responsibility to claim that anything at all is bound to be better than whatever it is that we do not like. We have to ask what changes would be for the better—and what price we probably would have to pay for each.

Most of the discussion of alienation is historically blind in *three* ways: One fails to inquire how things actually were in the past, and one remains oblivious of the fact that changes usually have side effects that, in the long run, prove much more important than the effects that were intended. Finally, one fails to see the current vogue of "alienation" in historical perspective.

Estrangement from nature, society, one's fellow men, and oneself is part of growing up. One has to detach oneself from the womb of one's environment in order to become a person, an individual, an independent being. Self-consciousness involves such detachment. One has to come to look upon oneself and others and the world as strange and perplexing.

It does not seem to follow from this that it should become extremely difficult for us to relate to other men. Or *does* it follow, after all? Isn't it part of the price one pays for excellence—for being exceptionally sensitive, thoughtful, and honest? There's the rub: What used to be the condition of those who were outstanding has become the condition of millions who are not blessed with any special talent. Goethe's Tasso says:

And when man in his agony grows mute,
a god gave me to utter what I suffer.

Now there are masses of men, almost as alienated as Goethe's Tasso, but unable to sing of what they suffer: They merely gripe.

More and more people get more and more education, are exposed to literature and art and music, develop some sensitivity along with the desire to become artists, writers, or creators of some sort—and find that the careers actually awaiting them are disappointingly dull.

Alienation is to be found in all ages, but it does not always take the same form. And many of the phenomena currently lumped together under this label are due in the main to two causes: mass *education* and the *population explosion*.

Long before the days of television, Nietzsche inveighed against the *Verdummung*, or moronization, of his people, and today moronization is widely associated with our mass media. But regardless of the kind of society men live in, moronization commences for most of them in their early twenties, if not before. It may seem fairer to say that it begins as soon as children are sent to school. But while most schools extinguish the sparks of curiosity that have survived that long, students usually also learn something—not nearly as much as they might, but still, something. Once out of school, most people cease to learn much and become progressively less curious. More precisely, their curiosity is perverted: The passion to inquire turns into inquisitiveness, and the magical power to read is used to pry into the private lives of movie stars.

For all that, more people read Plato and Shakespeare than ever before, and any notion that the masses used to be brighter and more knowledgeable than today, or more humane and more appreciative of poets, painters, and philosophers, is wildly out of touch with fact. In the United States more people go to college than ever before, and a higher percentage of the total population gets a higher education than in any other large country. The education most of them receive is scandalously bad, but incomparably better than what any similar percentage of a large population ever got before. Mass education depresses quality in the sense that the education is not as good as the best that used to be available for

a very small number; but the best education now available at our best colleges and graduate schools is easily comparable, if not superior, to the best education offered in former times. If it is less good in some fields, it is vastly superior in others. Many things that were learned thoroughly by our parents or grandparents are now neglected, but there are far more things learned by students today that were not, and could not have been, dreamed of fifty years ago. With so much recent history, literature, and science to teach, most teachers—and the fault here clearly lies with the older generation—simply are not up to also giving their pupils a good grounding in the classics, in the Bible, and in foreign languages, not to speak of their own language. It is imperative that we should try to improve education, but there is no reason to believe that things used to be better.

Even the best education must increase alienation. At every turn it shows us how what is familiar is not comprehended, and how what seemed clear is really quite strange. Comfortable prejudices crumble as we discover how little we know. If alienation is more widespread now than it used to be, it is because more people receive more education today than formerly.

Moreover, our educational system not only exposes pupils to great art and poetry and fiction; it also encourages them to believe that they can paint and write as well as anyone. It not only acquaints them after a fashion with some of the most original scientists; it also leads them to think that there is no reason why they should not make comparable discoveries. One does not only study the Presidents of the past; one is also taught that every American boy—and, perhaps, every American girl—can become President. But such wild expectations are doomed to be disappointed in most cases. And there are two reasons.

First, the creative life is full of depressions, and very few have talent enough to find an over-all sense of satisfaction in it. Instead of emphasizing fundamental skills and basic knowledge, training people for the jobs that actually await them, our educators too often talk blithely of projects and of research, promise and originality, discovery and creativity. But disciplined originality is very rare, and few pupils indeed

go on to make scientific discoveries or to write, paint, sculpt, or compose anything of lasting interest.

Secondly, the total number of people in most societies is increasing at an alarming rate. Thus, every American boy today has only a fraction of the chance to become President of his country that every American boy had a hundred years ago. This hardly seems to be a serious matter. But the student who chooses to become a scientist or writer, painter or philosopher, is apt to feel that the competition has become so keen that it defies comparison with previous ages. During the long period of his training he has no assurance that he will be able to make a living in his chosen field, and there is much less reason to expect that he will ever make his mark by doing something really worthwhile. And this is one of the most crucial experiences associated with alienation. But while the numbers of those who feel insecure and frustrated are clearly greater than ever, the situation has not become worse in terms of percentages. On the contrary, upward mobility has rarely been greater. But if one of those rare times was only a few years back, a sudden drop may create the erroneous impression that things are worse than ever.

Some of the experiences for which the word "alienation" is often used are an inevitable consequence of education; others are due to particular methods of education, and specifically to the way our system raises high expectations that are bound to remain unfulfilled in most cases. A great many forms of alienation could be avoided by providing much less education—a cure that would be incomparably worse than the disease. But some forms of alienation could be prevented by changing our educational system; by not stimulating utterly unrealistic hopes; by preparing students for the jobs that actually await them—and for the ever increasing leisure time that most men still use so disgracefully.

7. Against Marx's Heritage

As it becomes more and more impossible to keep up with developments in different fields, most people feel a growing need for bargain words that cost little or no study and can be used in a great variety of contexts with an air of expertise.

The point is not necessarily to deceive others; the greatest benefit to the user of such terms is that they reassure *him*. Instead of feeling ignorant and helpless, he feels that he is in on what is going on.

It is one of the major fringe benefits of such terms that they generate questions that can be discussed endlessly, not only at parties and in classes (what would some hostesses and teachers do without them?) but also in print. One large class of such words ends in *-ism*. Wonders can be worked with "realism" and "idealism" and, of course, with "existentialism": Was X a y-ist? Or: z-ism in the American drama. But not all bargain words end in *-ism*; witness "dialectic," "the absurd," and "alienation."

As a first therapeutic step I have suggested that we ask who is supposed to be alienated from whom or from what. It seems reasonable to suggest that if one or both terms of the relationship cannot be specified, "alienation" is the wrong word.

Another suggestion is bound to be more controversial. Some of the ways in which Marx used "alienation" are extremely far-fetched and should be given up—except, of course, in discussions of the thought of Marx and his followers. He was heavily influenced by Hegel and by Ludwig Feuerbach when he wrote his early manuscripts in 1844, and historically it is not difficult to understand why he used the term as he did; but now that it has acquired so many other meanings closer to the literal sense of the word, it would clarify matters considerably if we could draw the line somewhere.

Here is a passage from Marx's manuscript "Alienated Labor," in which he sums up what he means by alienation: "The alienation of the worker in his object finds expression as follows according to the principles of political economy: The more the worker produces, the less there is for him to consume; the more values he creates, the more he loses value and dignity; the more his product is shaped, the more misshapen the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous the worker; the more powerful the work is, the more powerless becomes the worker; the more spirit there is in the work, the more devoid of spirit and a slave of nature the worker."

It is worth noting that the final clause is ungrammatical in the original⁸ and that the whole paragraph is placed in parentheses, for it is all too often forgotten that these early manuscripts represent rough and unrevised drafts. Yet these ideas richly merit critical attention. In the first place, they are expressed again and again in the same fragment and in the other early manuscripts. Secondly, this is the birthplace of the fateful Marxian idea that the condition of the workers is bound to become more and more inhuman and intolerable until there is a violent revolution in which, according to *Das Kapital*, "the expropriators are expropriated."⁹ Finally, these ideas have been immensely influential not only on Marxism but also on the literature on alienation.

The passage quoted is a fine sample of Marx's style, which wallows in antitheses. But it is not altogether irrelevant that Marx was wrong. What Marx describes as an inevitable development is not what actually happened in England, in the United States, and in the other industrial nations of the West. It is easy to agree with Marx that the developments he pictures are, without exception, terrible: impoverishment, degradation, dehumanization, barbarization, enfeeblement, and moronization. It shouldn't happen to a dog. But why call all this "alienation"? And what led him to think it was inevitable?

The answers to both questions are to be found in Hegel and Feuerbach, whose names are encountered constantly in the manuscripts of 1844. Hegel had used the word "necessary" again and again as a synonym of "natural" and as an antonym of "arbitrary" or "utterly capricious." Among later German writers this confusion is common, and Marx's thought suffers severely from it.

Feuerbach had shown how man projects his best qualities into the deity until God becomes the image of perfection

⁸ *Je geistreicher die Arbeit, um so mehr geistloser [sic] und Naturknecht der Arbeiter . . .* MS, p. XXIII. See, e.g., Karl Marx, *Texte zu Methode und Praxis*, II: *Pariser Manuskripte 1844*, ed. Günther Hillmann, Rowohlt paperback 1966, p. 54.

⁹ Vol. I, near the end of Chapter 24. The whole paragraph, which could be said to represent the climax of volume I (volumes II and III were not published by Marx himself), invites comparison with the paragraph from "Alienated Labor."

and man a hopelessly imperfect sinner. Man strips himself of all that is good and strong to clothe God in goodness and strength, and the greater he makes his God, the smaller he makes himself. Now Marx sought to transpose this idea into laws of political economy; and his bold antitheses seem to charm those in search of Marxist humanism. If he had been right that the worker is divested of all the qualities that appear in his product—that its beauty, subtlety, and power leave him ugly, coarse, and weak—it could be argued that this is alienation. Using the German terms, one might even say that in that case we should have not only *Entäußerung* (divestment) but also *Entfremdung* (estrangement). But since it is not at all inevitable that the workers become poorer the more they produce, it makes little sense to call impoverishment “alienation.” And if we speak of moronization as “alienation” instead of keeping it clearly in focus as a phenomenon in its own right, we stand much less chance of coming to grips with it and preventing it.

The point here is not directed at Marx and his admirers only. Other writers also often use “alienation” as an antonym of self-realization. Depending on their conception of man’s true self, they use “alienation” to designate brutalization, moronization, loss of spontaneity, mindless conformity, lack of “authenticity,” or anything at all that one might call dehumanization. But we have words for these phenomena, and it is more discriminating and helps to clarify difficult questions if we take some trouble to find the right term. Serious critics are not satisfied to label what they like “swell” or “groovy” or “divine”; neither should serious writers be content to call what they deplore “alienation.”

Let us therefore restrict the term to cases in which someone feels estranged from something or from others. We need not stipulate that previously A was close to B. Estrangement can take the form of A’s suddenly feeling or realizing how a gulf separates him from B.

It is imperative to realize that alienation need not be destructive. One cannot participate in all the groups to which one might belong: One has to make choices. Not only are time and energy limited, but some groups define themselves in opposition to other groups. Alienation from B may be the

price one pays for belonging to C; and it need not even be felt to be a price.

Moreover, some kinds of alienation are fruitful. Witness, for example, the discourse of Nietzsche's Zarathustra "On the Way of the Creator." We have seen one writer equating alienation with "what in theistic language would be called 'sin'"; and suggestions abound that we ought to prevent alienation. But that would really dehumanize man.

It does not follow that we should be casual or callous about destructive alienation. The evils the young Marx attacked in the passage we have quoted should be fought; but as Marx himself discovered within less than four years, to fight them effectively it is best not to lump them together under the catch-all label of "alienation."

8. A Pluralistic View

We have given reasons for not restricting the term "alienation" to self-destructive conditions. Should we then use it exclusively for fruitful estrangement—for the conditions we have illustrated from the lives of various philosophers and poets? The trouble is that one does not know in advance when estrangement will prove to be fruitful. Moreover, self-destruction and creativity are not mutually exclusive. This last point is central in the Prologue to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*; but those put off by its flamboyant tone may ponder Nietzsche's own case or that of Franz Kafka. Kafka was one of the most creative and original writers of our century; but he left instructions to burn the manuscripts of *The Trial* and *The Castle* because he felt so sure that he had failed. It would be perverse and unhelpful to say either that he thought he was alienated but, being a great writer, actually was not—or that he was alienated without knowing it. It is much less misleading to say that he was and felt deeply alienated without realizing how fruitful his condition was, how prophetic it made his voice, how within a mere thirty years millions of readers in many different countries would feel: *Mea res agitur*.

Insofar as alienation involves a painful sense of isolation, self-doubt, and frustration, it may seem as if there were two

kinds of men: the few who, being creative, can cope with it; and the many, who not being creative, cannot. Nietzsche often wrote as if this were a palpable fact. He also assumed that those who have the gift to utter what they suffer, suffer much more deeply than the mute masses; and his concern was pre-eminently with those whose agony seemed greatest to him. As for the multitude, he occasionally suggested that it might be best to keep them contented with their mediocrity and not raise their hopes by giving them too much education.

Those more concerned with the uncreative masses may take an even dimmer view of life than Nietzsche did. While accepting his tragic account of the creative life, they are prone to feel that the wretchedness of those who lack even the comfort of occasional achievement makes this world a vast hell.

Any such bifurcation of humanity, however, must be rejected. Not only are a man's contemporaries poor judges of his rank, as Nietzsche well knew from firsthand experience, but many, like Kafka, are quite unsure of their own status. Nor do these two crucial objections go far enough: They still leave the dualistic model untouched and show only how difficult it is to decide, at least in some cases, to which camp a person belongs. But any such dualism is ill-founded and pernicious.

Nobody is creative all the time, and nobody is creative none of the time. Unfortunately, many people approximate the latter extreme, especially as they grow older. But this is due in part to two great errors. Their education gives them far too romantic an idea of creativity, and then persuades them that they are creative in this wholly exceptional sense. Most men discover soon enough that they are not, and then give up. In effect, they swallow the false notion that there are two kinds of men, and their resignation is often poisoned by resentment against those who do not give up.

The feeling of estrangement could be minimized by drastically reducing popular education, by brainwashing, by drugs—and even by frontal lobotomies. But if most men are mere caricatures of what they might be, it is quite possible that in order to become more humane they must first become more

estranged. This notion finds support not only in Hegel but also in some of the world's great religions.

Judaism and Christianity agree in their original challenge to men to alienate themselves from nature, society, and themselves. The individual is not supposed to feel altogether at home in nature; Judaism lifted man out of nature and stressed the discontinuity between man and nature, the cardinal differences between man and animal. Moreover, it is one of the leitmotifs of the Hebrew Bible that the people are not supposed to be "like all the nations" but a people apart. Theoretically, this could have meant that their sense of community compensated them entirely for their alienation from all other nations. And reading the second part of Buber's *Ich und Du*, one may get the feeling that this was what happened. But in the Hebrew Bible we find no trace of such perfect community. Rather we find a succession of imposing figures who not only tell their people that they should be different but who are themselves thoroughly alienated from their own society. Moses, Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah are among the outstanding examples. They not only remind their people that they were strangers in the land of Egypt; they themselves are strangers among their own people.

Sigmund Freud spoke out of this tradition and gave a clear picture of fruitful alienation when he said at the outset of his *Selbstdarstellung* (1925): "The university, which I entered in 1873, brought me, to begin with, several palpable disappointments. Above all I was struck by the presumption that I should feel inferior and not a member of the *Volk* because I was a Jew. The former notion I rejected quite decisively. I have never comprehended why I should be ashamed of my descent or, as one was then beginning to say, my race. The membership in the *Volk* that was denied me I renounced without much regret. I thought that for an eager fellow worker a small place must be found within the framework of humanity even without such acceptance. But these first impressions of the university had one consequence that remained important later on: early in life I became familiar with the lot of standing among the opposition and being placed under

a ban by the 'compact majority.' This laid the foundation for a certain independence of judgment."¹⁰

In other religions the sense of alienation went much deeper and became more problematic. In primitive Christianity the feeling was widespread that this world belonged to the devil and was altogether hopeless. Nature was the enemy, sex was evil; the body was a prison, as among the Orphics; and society was Caesar's. Messianic hopes were deferred to another world. One despaired of social justice here and now. And Paul offered a classical formulation for self-alienation: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7.15).

Nor were Hinduism and Buddhism less alienated. The sages of the Upanishads sought to estrange their disciples from nature, from society, from their own bodies, and from whatever they might consider their own selves: All this was ultimately unreal and unworthy the attention of the true sage. One must detach oneself altogether from this whole world and recognize the sole ultimate reality of Atman, that inmost core of being which transcends all individuality and is identical with Brahma. Salvation was to be found far from society in complete withdrawal.

The Buddha, too, sought to detach men from society, from all desire—from all attachment. He founded a monastic order without teaching any sense of community. His last words were said to have been: "Work out your own salvation with diligence."

To use a phrase dear to Marxists, it is no accident that modern alienated youth so often turns to the wisdom of India. Here is balm for alienated souls and a promise of salvation. One does not have to choose this path to recognize the truth in the great religions that the development of the spirit requires a full measure of estrangement. This insight does not entail otherworldliness or any form of escape at all. In the words of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, we can "remain faithful to the earth."

¹⁰ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XIV (1948), p. 34 f. The phrase in single quotes is from Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* (*Volksfeind* in German).

Sartre's Orestes says to Zeus: "Man's life begins on the other side of despair." And Goethe's Prometheus defied Zeus well over a century and a half earlier:

Did you fancy perchance
that I should hate life
and fly into the desert
because not all
blossom dreams ripened?

Neither Sartre's Orestes nor Goethe's Prometheus withdrew into solitary defiance. Both chose to suffer for others.

Karl Marx, rereading his Aeschylus every year, saw himself as another Prometheus. He, too, wanted to bring into being a race of free men. He lived to say that he was no Marxist; and the twentieth-century literature on alienation would scarcely have led him to recant his declaration that the "philosophical nonsense" about alienation did not help. Much of it would certainly have struck the hard-boiled old polemicist as sentimental mush.

It is tempting to be as polemical as Marx was and to say that the fundamental alternative is that between Marx and Hegel—and that Hegel was right and Marx wrong. Hegel saw estrangement as the very heartbeat of the life of the spirit, while Marx wanted to get rid of alienation.

It seems odd and historically blind to me that so many writers today want to go back to the young Marx, although I have pleaded extenuating circumstances on their behalf. But we cannot turn back the clock and return to Hegel. He had much wisdom, and we can learn from him; but one would have to be "alienated" in the obsolete psychiatric sense to wish to return to him.

Hegel, of course, was not the only one to realize that as freedom, education, and self-consciousness increase, alienation grows too. Plato warned us long ago that there is no pre-established harmony between liberty and happiness, and Dostoevski's Grand Inquisitor makes the same point more briefly. Both believed that it was possible, and indeed crucial, to make a sharp division among men and to reserve liberty and higher education for the very few. Others have sought different panaceas. Marx placed his faith in a new economic

structure, and nowadays the search for new forms of community is sometimes held to be our best hope for salvation. But the forms of alienation are manifold, and no single prescription will fit all, unless we drastically decrease men's potential.

Even the profound and painful sense of isolation that sometimes accompanies the feeling of estrangement is met in a variety of ways by one and the same person. Kierkegaard, for example, was an exceptionally creative individual who, nevertheless, did not rely solely on his creative work; he also sought help from a faith that might ease his otherwise scarcely endurable sense of alienation. Others, though creative, join various groups, cliques, or schools; and sex, friendship, and love are compatible with creativity.

All this is so obvious that one should not have to mention it, but the fashionable talk of alienation generally conjures up either a monochromatic picture or a dualistic one. Against such views one must insist that alienation is a central feature of human existence. Creativity is one response to it, commitment another; and both entail further alienation. There are many forms of detachment and involvement, and creativity can be indifferent to social problems, while work in social causes can be, but certainly need not be, relatively uncreative. There are many paths, but all involve estrangement.

Whoever would try to protect the young from alienation has despaired of man. It would be more in keeping with the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, Confucius, and Socrates to say instead: Life without estrangement is scarcely worth living; what matters is to increase men's capacity to cope with alienation.¹¹

¹¹ I am indebted to my friends Siegwart Lindenberg, Michael Sukale, and Melvin Tumin, who very kindly read a draft and discussed it with me. Their comments have been most helpful.